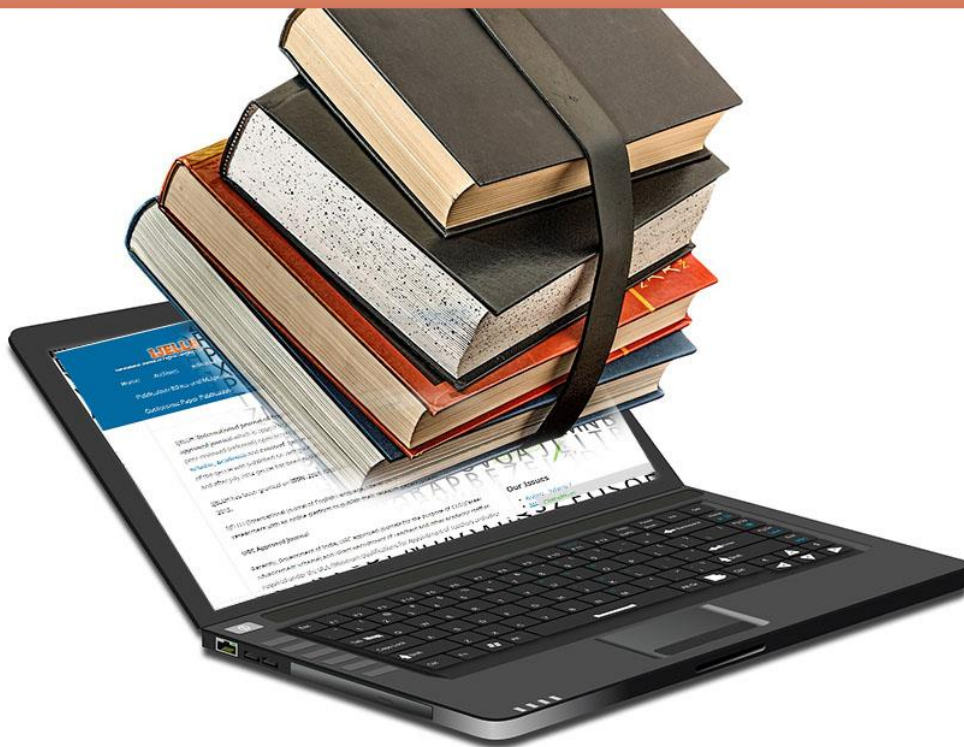


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Dr Munejah Khan

Assistant Professor

Department of English Language and Literature

Islamic University of Science and Technology Pulwama J&K, India

munejahk@gmail.com

Misba Majeed

Research Scholar

Department of English Language and Literature

Islamic University of Science and Technology Pulwama J&K, India

From Burger's Daughter to Rosa Burger: The Vision of an Independent Self in Nadine

Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter*

Abstract

Nadine Gordimer's writing emerges from the backdrop of imperially controlled South Africa. Her novel *Burger's Daughter* (1974) focuses on the protagonist's quest for an autonomous self and an independent identity. The title of the novel indicates that Rosa the central female character has no independent existence and is defined in relation to her father. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) states that "women are positioned as the 'other' in relation to the concept of 'self' which has been colonized by patriarchy". Rosa is alienated because she is a 'woman'. As the novel has a colonial setting Rosa becomes the symbol of the stifling effects of colonization and patriarchy. Rosa's life is dictated by her anti-apartheid activist father, Lionel Burger and she is ostracized from the white society because she is

Burger's daughter. Her place in African society is no way different from that of the black Negro and she too feels ostracized from the civilized white society for her father's anti-apartheid activities. Initially Rosa is not a fervent supporter of anti-apartheid but she cannot shake off the expectations placed on her because she is Burger's daughter. The role of women in society is constructed in the patriarchal imagination and Rosa is expected to submit to patriarchy and follow the path of her father politically and as well as socially.

The paper explores the struggle of the protagonist to crave an identity of her own wherein she is recognised as an individual and not labeled as 'Burger's daughter'.

Keywords: patriarch, identity, self, other, woman

I

“One is not born, but rather becomes woman”(14) asserts Simone De Beauvoir in her seminal work *The Second Sex*. The statement implies that the characteristics used to identify a woman are not innate but learnt. Becoming a woman is part of the female education and orientation. Beauvoir and other feminists distinguish between ‘being female’ and being constructed as a ‘woman’:

Feminism distinguishes between the word sex, which refers to our biological constitution as female or male, and the word gender, which refers to our cultural programming as feminine or masculine. In other words, women are not born feminine, and men are not born masculine. Rather, these gender categories are constructed by society... is an example of what has come to be called social constructionism. The belief that men are superior to women has been used, feminists have observed, to

justify and maintain the male monopoly of positions of economic, political, and social power, in other words, to keep women powerless That is, the inferior position long occupied by women in patriarchal society has been culturally, not biologically, produced (Tyson 86).

Thus patriarchal agenda is put in force through the social construct of gender. Women are labelled as inferior and relegated to a secondary position. Beauvoir also outlines the ways in which woman is perceived as ‘the other’, second to man, who is considered and treated as the ‘first’ or default sex. Women are usually understood as objects or bodies to be controlled by men. Patriarchy lays down norms to be followed by women and is “determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her ;...”(26). Patriarchy discursively constructs woman in binary opposition to man. The woman is the “incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential”, he is the “Subject, he is the Absolute. She is the other”. (26) The identity and existence of a woman solely depends on her relationship with man. Women are not defined in their own right but always in relation to the men they are associated with – father, brother, husband, son etc. However, the patriarchy not only defines a woman but also suppresses her. It is the male hegemonic order that decides what identity she dons.

II

Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014) is recognised as one of the authoritative anti-apartheid voices in South Africa. She was a staunch critic of apartheid that deprived the black people of basic human rights. Her writings deal with the constant struggle for identity, self- confirmation, racism and slavery. Gordimer was an anti-apartheid activist and some autobiographical

streaks can be seen in her novel *Burger's Daughter* (1979) which is woven around the anti-apartheid movement. In the novel Female identity is one of the and the story is about the quest for identity by the protagonist. The whole novel recounts Rosa's struggle to overthrow the label of identity which categorizes her as 'Burger's daughter'.

Burger's Daughter (1979) is set against the plight of the blacks after the Soweto Uprising of 1976. In the novel Gordimer showcases the struggle of the South African white female Rosa Burger to seek an identity for herself distinct from her father's legacy. Her father Lionel burger was an anti-apartheid activist and a member of the South African Communist party. The white Afrikaner died in prison after serving a three year sentence for treason. Rosa's mother Cathy also died in prison for being involved in anti-apartheid resistance. Rosa grows up in an atmosphere of uncertainty because of the political affiliation of her parents. Rosa realises the burden of being Lionel Burger's daughter early in her life as she is expected to share her parent's political ideology. She is always referred to as Burger's daughter and never as Rosa.

The narration of the novel focuses on the female protagonist Rosa's search for identity. Through the title of the novel Gordimer shows that the unnamed daughter's identity is dependent on her father. Lionel Burger names his daughter after the polish Marxist Rosa Luxemburg. The revolutionary name chosen by Lionel for his daughter seals her fate and she is destined to play a part in the anti-apartheid movement. The subjectivity of Rosa is overpowered by Lionel Burger's political association with the anti-racist organization - South African Communist Party (SACP).

The novel begins with an epigraph from Levi-Strauss: “I am the place in which something has occurred”. Rosa’s body is signified as the place in which something has occurred and from which subjectivity is explored and constructed. Rosa involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle is not a matter of choice but rather a compulsion to be fulfilled because of her parents. Rosa delivered messages to Noel de Witt, in prison by posing as his fiancée. After the prison meeting her father “interrogated about what Noel had managed to convey under the Lovey-dovey”. (63) Rosa therefore, becomes an agent of her father’s political ideology and she has no opinion of her own. Rosa is oriented to submit to the authority of her father by submerging her own identity. Even after the death of her parents she cannot disengage from the obligation of continuing to follow her father footsteps. She says, “As he had died, or the fact of his death existed in my presence without having been aware of it, so I lived in my father’s presence without knowing its meaning” (78). Her physical features also connect her to Lionel Burger, people tell her that she has, “a mouth exactly like her father’s” (4). Parallels are often drawn between Rosa and her father and it is expected of her to carry forward the anti-apartheid resistance movement. People expect her to share her father’s ideological convictions as if she is an extension of her father’s personality and such expectations burden Rosa. Rosa cannot dislodge from the identity of being Burgers daughter. Everything about her is attributed to her father; she is told “you’re always polite, aren’t you. Just like your father” (17).

Patriarchy tends to define women in relation to men. Rosa realises even in the absence of her father there are men who try to come close to her because of her father’s political stance. Rosa is constructed as a political subject who has no private life. Rosa as ‘Burger’s Daughter’ is created by the communist ideology of her family, and as an ‘individual’ she formed her own ideology. Rosa’s identity is colonized and overpowered by the patriarchal discourse

symbolized by father, her lovers Conrad and Bernard and even her brother Bassie. Rosa flees to France from her father's legacy and is involved romantically with Bernard Chablier, a French writer pursuing doctorate. She tries to find sensual pleasure with the French man and is unburdened from being repeatedly called "Burger's daughter". But the irony is that her new found identity is also not her own because now she is referred to as "Chablier's mistress" (304). Rosa like other women is an 'object' devoid of individuality, a 'body' to be owned by the agents of patriarchy. With Bernard Chablier arriving on the scene, nothing changes for Rosa except that now she is defined in reference to Chablier and not in reference to her father.

Rosa's search for an autonomous self and an independent identity is influenced by her parent's political stand. Rosa Burger struggles to forge an identity for herself which is not defined by her father's position as an anti-apartheid activist. Her combat to form an identity for herself exposes the connection between patriarchy and racism under the colonial rule. Her life is affected socially and politically and she is even denied a passport and says: "I have no passport because I am my father's daughter'. People who associate with me must be prepared to suspect because I am my father's daughter." (59). She is being watched by the regime and travel is not open to her because of her heritage. Later in the novel she manages to get passport and flees to Europe in order to get away from her father's influence. Her travelling is restricted to certain countries and she is not allowed to communicate with journalists. Also she has to assure the government that there is no political behind her plans to travel. "Rosa travels 'the world round as your navel' (192) to understand her body's paradoxical relationship to discourse, to explore the subject/other division, and to examine the conflict between the identity one claims and the subject position to which one is relegated" (qtd in Halil 31). Rosa's ancestry binds her and she is not free to travel and meet people.

Lionel Burger's first wife Katya influences Rosa in many ways while she is in France. Under the motherly care of Katya, Rosa explores the possibility of constructing an identity for herself devoid of the influence of her father. Katya tells her: "But here you never really have to start from scratch ... Ah no, it's too much to take on. That's what I love – nobody expects you to be more than you are, you know. That kind of tolerance, I didn't even know it existed" (250). Katya allows Rosa to branch out, and nurtures her in the process. The protagonist "feels simultaneously abandoned by her father and overwhelmed by his claim on her, a claim on her presumptive willingness to struggle in the cause" (Greenstein 236).

In Europe Rosa encounters her childhood companion Bessie, the black boy adopted by her parents after he was orphaned. Bessie plays a crucial role in affecting Rosa's consciousness. Rosa's heritage and search for an independent identity comes together when she commits herself to the struggle but according to her own philosophy. She returns to South Africa and realizes that she cannot deny her Afrikaner heritage: "Rosa Burger returns to her native country within the period for which her passport was valid" (345). She understands the suffering of her people and her rebirth takes place after her return to the native place. She upholds a heritage handed down by the martyr parents and contributes to the resistance movement not as Burger's daughter but as Rosa Burger. She says:

I don't know the ideology.

It's about suffering.

How to end suffering.

And it ends in suffering. Yes, it's strange to live in a country where there are still heroes. Like anything else, I do what I can. I am teaching them to walk again, at Baragwanath Hospital. They put one foot before the other. (344).

At the end Rosa makes her own contribution to the antiapartheid cause without losing her own identity. She commits herself to the struggle but according to her own philosophy, by becoming a physiotherapist treating the victims of the Soweto Riots of 1976. Rosa thus becomes a revolutionary subject trying to uphold a heritage handed on by martyred parents while carving an identity of her own wherein she is recognised as an individual and not labeled as 'Burger's daughter'.

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